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## Jordan at a Glance: History, Politics, Economy

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**Jordan is a monarchy in the Middle East under the authoritarian rule of King Abdullah II. Despite internal conflicts, a difficult geo-strategic situation and economic problems, it is currently the most stable country in the region.**

### History

The state of Jordan is a product of the early 20th century. It emerged in 1923 on the territory of the League of Nations mandate for Palestine east of the Jordan River. The Emir Abdullah, originally from Saudi Arabia, was chosen as regent under the British protectorate. As of 1946 he ruled the country as king, and Jordan became independent. After a turbulent time with coups and anti-monarchic movements in neighboring countries, it was predominantly the Arab-Israeli conflict that marked the decades thereafter. When the state of Israel was founded in 1948, and also following the Six-Day War in 1967, numerous Palestinians fled to Jordan. Initially, Jordan also administrated the Gaza Strip and the West Bank until these areas became occupied by Israel in 1967. As a reaction to the first Palestinian Intifada, in 1988 the Jordanian King finally renounced his territorial claim.

Due to low tax income and a lack of natural resources, the Jordanian state relies on foreign financial aid and has never been able to survive without help from international donors. Initially, Jordan benefited from its status as a "front-line state" against Israel and received money from the rich Gulf States. Following the 1994 peace treaty with Israel the king obtained substantial development aid from the United States. Jordan had already cultivated a covert relationship with Israel as far as security was concerned, as both states were interested in curbing (militant) Palestinian nationalism.

The present share of inhabitants of Palestinian origin is estimated to be about 40-50 percent; the 2015 census discloses only information on Palestinians without Jordan citizenship (a little under seven percent of the population). The minority of Jordanian origin is privileged, yet partly discriminates against Palestinians in various areas. One of the reasons for this is that during the so-called Black September, the 1970 Jordanian civil war, Palestinian militias openly challenged the state's sovereignty and as a result were forcibly expelled by the Jordanian army. Due to major socioeconomic differences, citizens of Palestinian origin are not a homogeneous group.

Along with mainly Sunni Muslims, there is a religious minority of Christians living in Jordan. Furthermore, there are ethnic Chechens and Circassians (one percent of the population), who immigrated in the 1880s. The total population stands at about 9.5 million people, four million of which live in the capital city of Amman, including numerous Iraqi and Syrian refugees as well as Arabs who immigrated in earlier years.

In this artificially created nation, the monarch has a unifying, identity-building function. King Hussein ruled the country for 46 years; after his death King Abdullah II took over. The royal family traces their descent back to the family of the Prophet Muhammad, the Hashemites. This is a source of religious legitimization. Due to his origin from the Hejaz region of Saudi Arabia and therefore as a kind of outsider, the monarch is in a position to fill the role of an arbiter who stands above all societal groups. The population accepts this role, which prevents an escalation of conflicts between the various groups. Oftentimes however, the groups are played off against one another through partisanship or accusations of disloyalty.

### Politics

For decades, King Hussein ruled the country without a parliament. Following the decline of the oil price in the 1980s, the middle and lower classes were afflicted by the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) structural adjustment measures imposed on the country: cuts in subsidies led to increasing food costs, causing "bread riots" and local uprisings in traditional government strongholds. As a response, the king opened the political system, reconvened parliament, and in 1989 elections were held again. Members of the "Islamic Action Front" (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, gained a substantial amount of mandates. The founding of political parties was first allowed in 1992, but they have been of little importance. The Islamist IAF is the only party with a substantial platform to this date.

The electoral law, which depending on the political situation may be changed prior to each election, provides mostly for a one-vote system. The primary loyalty towards the people's own tribal representatives leads to voting decisions that are more affected by the candidates' family origin rather than by their political platforms. Tribal representatives loyal to the government are always favored, the

reason being that the frequently reorganized division of constituencies overrepresents rural areas. This has a major impact on the composition of the parliament, because the citizens of Palestinian origin – many of them favoring the IAF – for the most part live in the cities. So far mostly independent, royalist candidates have been elected into the parliament. Quota places are reserved for Christians and ethnic minorities as well as for women.

The parliament is primarily in charge of channeling money into the constituencies, since the members of parliament lobby to improve the infrastructure of their districts and to receive funds for investments. In any case, the Lower House's significance is marginal compared to the Upper House (the Senate) as well as to the government, both of which are appointed by the king. The palace itself, along with the security forces, is central to political power. Although many measures are regulated in decrees or laws, the latter are arbitrarily implemented, since informal rules such as patronage or clientelism undermine formal procedures.

The prime minister together with the whole government is frequently rotated out of office in order to signal political change and reforms. This way the monarchy protects itself against the emergence of autonomous power centers as well as against far-reaching demands of a dissatisfied population. Since criticism of the king is taboo, the opposition has little leeway anyway. The king presents himself as a benevolent sovereign, distanced from day-to-day politics, and blames political failures on the parliament and government. His concessions toward different population groups can be described as "divide and conquer" tactics. Short periods with greater political latitude alternate with phases in which freedoms are more restricted. As a result, the IAF decided to boycott the parliamentary elections in 1997, 2010, and 2013. In recent times, different blocs have split off the IAF, and the Muslim Brotherhood's movement has been politically marginalized.

The press exercises self-censorship, Internet journalism is even controlled by the state through the blocking of news websites. Reports criticizing the monarchy, the king's person, military involvement abroad besides the threat of Jihadi radicalization and attacks are taboo issues. In 2011 there was a protest movement, as in other Arab countries, but the demands were for reforms as opposed to an overthrow of the regime. The politically motivated demonstrations have faded; however, socioeconomic protests and strikes launched by professional associations continue.

Although Jordan is a monarchy, it is not the entire family of the Hashemites that rules the country. Members of the royal family nonetheless exert informal influence and are visible as patrons of charitable organizations. Due to the dominance of royal organizations, independent associations find themselves in competition and little room for maneuver. The numerous organizations founded since 1989 do not function as a means for participation like in a democratic civil society. Instead they serve as a tool for the state to control society. A variety of regulations and strict limitations for organized activities prevent autonomous ambitions and, above all, political involvement. A state-run umbrella organization prevents the emergence of independently acting NGOs. This umbrella organization is also the main receiver of development aid. Some of the registered "NGOs" also overridingly serve the acquisition of foreign funding.

As a general principle of societal organization, *wasta*, i.e. mediation, plays a crucial role. Family relations and good contacts are vital in daily life. While this system works well in tribal areas, it does discriminate against people who are not privileged by strong and effective family structures, in particular refugees or orphans; *wasta* is often criticized as cronyism and corruption.

## Economy

To a large extent, Jordan consists of desert lands and is dependent on costly energy imports. The lack of water is one of the most pressing problems and also creates a dependence on food imports. Bread, gasoline and natural gas for cooking are state-subsidized to mitigate the population's hardship. Not only does a lack of productivity, high population growth rates and the immigration of refugees push the economic system in Jordan into dependence on import and a deficit of foreign trade, but many Jordanians also rely on work as "migrant workers" abroad, mostly in the Gulf states.

The state is the country's largest employer, hiring almost half of the working population, with citizens of Jordanian origin dominating the public sector. In contrast, the population of Palestinian origin mostly works in the private sector and accounts for about 80 percent of the investments. Since 2000, Palestinian business people have also played a political role. Youth unemployment is high in Jordan, especially among the better educated. Only very few women participate in working life (13 percent compared to 68 percent in Germany). In the Global Gender Gap Index of 2015, which provides information on labor market participation, Jordan ranks 140th among 145 analyzed countries.

In the course of the 2011 protests, the Gulf Cooperation Council invited Jordan to become a member in order to stabilize the monarchy. So far, Jordan has not yet become a member, but has nonetheless received money from the Gulf States which helps to alleviate the budget deficit. Measures to calm the population, such as energy imports, subsidies and higher wages in the public service sector, have led to higher expenditures in the course of the "Arab Spring". The large number of Syrian refugees in Jordan (about 640,000 refugees are officially registered with the [UN High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#)) as well as Jordan's military involvement in the airstrikes against ISIS has now led to immense financial aid packages from the United States.

This article is part of the [country profile Jordan](#).



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